

## [A Small Merchant]

A SMALL MERCHANT

Original Names Changed Names

Cola P. White Jacob Stilley [???

Date of first writing: July 5, 1939

Name of person interviewed: Cola P. White (white)

Address: Wilson, N. C.

Occupation: Merchant

Writer: Stanley Combs

Reviser: Edwin Hassengill

Number of words: About 2,700

A SMALL MERCHANT

Jacob Stilley was busy dusting the shelves in his store. He operates a small retail store near the outer edge of the business section of town. His stock consists of a line of candies, cigars, cigarettes, cold drinks, a few pies, cakes, and canned goods. He also has a few punchboards, a slot machine, and a small pool table. In this he has worked and lived for the past several years.

"There ain't much ever happened to me" he said. "I was born on a farm twenty-eight years ago last October. My mother died while I was quite young. Let's see, I think I was a little

## Library of Congress

less than three years old — somewhere between two and three years of age. The Old Man sent me to live with my grandparents, and I lived with them until he got him another wife. Then I went to live with him and his new wife. I was only about nine years old, and I attended school in the country off and on according to the weather. If the weather was bad I stayed at home.

2

“Being young like I was, I got along with my stepmother good. She was good to me and I reckon I thought as much of her as I would my own mother. About sixteen or seventeen years ago we all moved here. I didn't go to school much more for I had to work to help make a living. It wasn't long after we come to town before the Old Man got work as a carpenter. He makes right good wages when he works, but it seems like they have less work each year. Yet, at seasons they are rushed and have to hire extra help.

“I worked here and there over town first at one thing then another like kids do until I finally got a steady job with one of the small grocery stores. The man that owned the store worked his family as much as possible. I was about the only outsider except for delivery boys that ride the bicycle. He and the family seemed to take a liking to me, and I stayed with him until he sold out.

“During this time the Old Man was bringing his second family into the world. I have two half brothers and two half sisters. We all got along fine together. I reckon I feel towards my half brothers and half sisters the same as I would if we all had the same mother. My stepmother told me more about my mother than anyone else. The Old Man never told me anything, and my grandparents never told me much.

“The Old Man and my mother never did get along together. He was cross and irritable and always finding fault with her. They were never happy like folks ought to be. I guess it was a good thing one of them could die. After I grew up and could understand, my stepmother told me how bad they got along together. Of course, I guess there was a reason, for they

## Library of Congress

never did love each other. They got married because they had to, and they were only married a few months before a child was born and died. They kept living together and then I came on in regular time.

"I was pretty near grown before my stepmother died. She trusted me a lot, and I guess maybe it was because I helped out on the living expenses so much. I always spent a few dollars of my weekly salary for something to eat. I usually got such staple foods as flour, lard, meal, and potatoes.

"After the grocery store was sold I had to look for other work. I was fortunate. I got in with the A & P store here in town. My salary was more, but the work was a lot harder. For awhile I thought I would not be able to stand it; my back troubled me. I've never been able to do hard work like others do. I can go right along with light work that I can handle, but the heavy work gets me.

"It was about this time that I began going with the girls. A person in my physical condition don't have any business with 4 a wife, but I always enjoyed going with the girls. I went with a lot of them. I did not go long with anyone but always had several on the string. The Old Man got scared, for he didn't think much of some of them I went with. He tried to get me to let them alone, telling me I would get into trouble, but I had a head of my own and kept right on going with them and having a good time. He kept after me and complained frequently and finally told me if I got into trouble not to bother him about it. This made me mad and I told him I would go with who I pleased and when I went to jail I would willingly stay there rather than call on him for help.

"My stepmother had brought four children into the family. The doctor told her not to have any more as it would be dangerous. Her health was bad, and work was not so plentiful. She had her life insured for \$500 and was going to lose it; she wanted to hold onto it so she would be put away respectable. One day she talked with me and told me about her insurance, her health, what the doctor had told her, and she said she was that way again

## Library of Congress

and she just felt like it was going to take her away from here. She asked me to take over the policy and keep up the insurance. I took it over for her and paid on it every week. I kept that life insurance policy up for my stepmother until her death which was during/ that childbirth. Her hospital and doctor bill run close to \$100. After the bills were all paid there was better than \$300 5 left out of the insurance money. Of course, the policy was made out in favor of the Old Man and he collected it. He never even thanked me for keeping the policy paid up and all in the world I ever got out of it was \$2. He loaned one of the men that worked with him \$3 and he handed \$2 of it back to me to give to the Old Man, but I told him about it and kept the money.

“This left us all without a housekeeper. My half sister was too small to do the housework. I told the Old Man we could hire a colored woman to do the cleaning and we could [bach?] and make out. We would all stay together and we would soon learn to get by, but he set about looking for another wife — a number three. Before I knew anything about it, that \$300 was all gone. The Old Man had run through with it all after another red-haired woman. This is where I protested. I didn't see where he had any business with a widow woman with three kids that average a little older than his by his second wife. It looked very much to me like he was preparing to add to his trouble. I talked and tried to reason with him every way I could. Finally I saw it didn't do no good. He was determined to go ahead and marry her. I had been helping along with the family expense right much and when I found out nothing else would do any good I told him that when he married her, if he did, I would leave home and withdraw all my support.

6

“He is an older man than me; he is my father and I realize that; he has been active in the work of the Holiness Church and tries to do right; and he is regarded by many in the Church as a sort of a preacher, but I could not see where such a marriage and the mixing of two groups of children could result in any good. He went on and married again. I took my clothes and found a boarding house nearby. She moved in and took charge. Everything seemingly went along O. K. Summer came and work began to slacken and I

## Library of Congress

was laid off, so I opened a small business of my own over in the colored section of town. I did not have much and could not make much. There was a boy that wanted to drive a car for hire, so I bought an old one and put it out with him. He tried it out for awhile and didn't make much for himself or me either. Before I realized it he was handling bootleg whiskey. I began thinking about that and the more I thought it over the more trouble I could see in it. I decided it wouldn't do at all, so I took the car away from him and used it myself. I was not making much and couldn't drive much. That fall I added a woodyard to my business and the car came in handy to deliver with.

"I kept busy with my little business and visiting among my friends and paid very little attention to the home family. Frequently I saw the Old Man or some of the children in passing and I thought everything was going on pretty well at home. Then 7 one day someone came running after me and said the Old Man was in the well. I went over home as quickly as possible and when I got there the police was there bringing him out of a sixty-foot well with the chain used for drawing water. They got him out and carried him to jail without a change of clothes. He sent for me. Mind you, he had told me that whenever I got into trouble not to call on him, but I was the first one he called for.

"I learned that he and his beloved red-headed wife had had some trouble. In the fuse there was a scramble. He had sliced at her throat with a safety razor and then run out in the back yard and jumped into the well. He went down feet first and when he came up the well was small enough so he could put his feet on one side, and his hips against the other and stay on top. They say he did some hollering for help. Most all the neighbors heard him. As he told me all about it there in jail he declared he was through and would have nothing more to do with her. I went to the house and asked his wife for a change of clothes so as to make him a little more comfortable. She ordered me away and said I would not get anything. I soon told her I came at his request for a change of clothes and I intended to get them. I didn't mind going in after them, and/ I told her if she interfered the trouble she had already had wouldn't begin to be a start. She went in after the clothes herself. While she was gone I went in after his 8 pocketbook and money. He told me where he had it hid, but

## Library of Congress

it was all gone. I took his clothes back to jail and arranged for his bond so he could get out. When I got him out I walked home with him. When she saw us coming in the front yard he went out the back way and left. I considered that a piece of good luck. She stayed away and I moved back home and again helped with the living expenses.

“The Old Man was kept pretty busy for a few months and apparently got along fine. I sold my small business and moved over here where I am now. I have pretty long hours and I let some of the family stay here while I got off to go to a show, a ball game, or to see my girl. When I would leave him I noticed she would stop in and visit with him. I objected to this, but it didn't do no good. The Old Man got to running about some, too. After awhile, he got one of them dirty social diseases and was laid up in the hospital. I helped him through and paid as much of his hospital expense as I could, and when he got out it wasn't long before he and the redhead went back together again. I picked up my clothes and left. He has never paid any more of that hospital bill and I don't feel like I should pay it. The Old Man told them he was going to kill them all and then shoot himself here awhile back, but he won't do that.

“I am working here and doing well enough, I guess. Seems 9 like I ought to make some money, but I manage to spend it all. I spend more for whiskey than I should. Eating at the cafe is expensive boarding, but I can run down the street and get something to eat anytime I want. Some of my friends tell me I ought to get married. I have a girl that I have been going with for a long time, and I could marry her tomorrow if I wanted to. I reckon we both could live as cheaply as I do now, but there are other things to consider. My back is not normal and there is a place in on hip that bothers me. I went to the clinic and the doctor there wanted to break my back and straighten it. He said I would be out of work from four to six mouths. I don't think I will ever agree to that.

“The sore in my hip don't heal. I have had it lanced a couple of times and I don't dare let it heal over now. It drains constantly. The doctors here don't know, or maybe just don't tell me, what is my trouble. I want to go to the hospital just as soon as I can save enough

## Library of Congress

money and arrange the time. I want a thorough examination. I went to one of the doctors here and wanted him to open that place so it would drain out completely and heal, but he said he wouldn't stick a knife in there for \$500. I made up my mind he didn't know what the trouble was and considered it bad practice to use the knife unless he knew what it was for.

"I thought a great deal about marrying. Sometimes I lay here all alone without a living soul in the building but me. It's 10 lonesome, and the nights are long. It seems like they will never end, even when I am up until twelve and one o'clock at night. Someone to talk to would be a lot of comfort and the mere fact that you are not all alone would be a lot of relief. The girl is willing to marry any time, but I can't make up my mind it's the best thing to do. I have always heard it said that when you are /in doubt over a thing don't do it. There is another saying that 'anticipation is better than realization sometimes. ' While I am feeling like I do now it's best not to do anything, so I will continue on and endure it all alone awhile longer.

"Living alone as I do now is a handicap in several ways. I find it extremely hard to get the proper things to eat. I necessarily must keep my expenses down, and it's almost impossible to get the fresh vegetables I like in my meals. I never get out to anything that is going on. If I was married to the right kind of a woman she would drag me out to church and other places once in awhile. Like it is, I have not darkened a church door in I don't know when. I get away from here two or three times each week long enough to go to a picture show and occasionally get away to see a ball game. Last week I got to see my grandmother. It's the first time I have been to see her in over a year. If I married I feel like some of this would be changed. One would feel more like he was living and a part of the world.

11

"Politics never interested me. I see people that devote all their time to it, but as a rule they never amount to much. I don't even go to the trouble to keep my name on the register so I can vote. At the last election several came around and asked me to vote for them. Some

## Library of Congress

even made some big promises. I presume they promised others like they did me, but I have never seen where any of these promises ever got anyone anything.

“My home life is different from most other men of my age. I am right here on the job all the time. It eliminates the possibility of someone breaking in at night. Before I moved in here someone would break in every now and then. I have my own bed and mattress and covers. Everything in the room is mine; it's all paid for and I run things my way. I have a colored woman that does my washing and if I want my bed changed I can get her to do it for me. She cleans out the rooms often as I want. Taken all in all, I think I am doing about as well as can be expected.”

[AHB?]